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**Future looks clear for students in new program; LCSC's degree in radiography is helping to fill a nationwide shortage of technicians**

By JOEL MILLS  
of the Tribune

With one look at a friend's MRI scan, Jennifer Spedden of Lewiston saw her future.

"I always wanted to do something with science and math, and I knew I wanted to do something in the medical field," said the 21-year-old Spedden.

So the Lewiston resident did just that, enrolling in one of Lewis-Clark State College's newest programs, radiography.

The scan that so fascinated Spedden was a detailed, digital picture of a family friend's brain who has multiple sclerosis. And while she won't be qualified to perform MRIs after she completes her three-year associate in radiography next year, she can do X-rays.

And about 70 percent of medical imaging is still the basic radiography Spedden is learning, said Victor White, program director.

One of Spedden's classmates during the clinical portion of training is Erin Willows, also of Lewiston. After high school, Willows had aspirations of becoming a dental assistant, and enrolled at Eastern Washington University in Cheney.

"But I just decided that cleaning people's teeth all day wasn't for me," she said with a smile any dentist would love. Both Willows and Spedden were taking a break last week from the clinical portion of their training at St. Joseph Regional Medical Center.

Willows' mother, Joanne, works at St. Joseph, so Erin Willows, too, was always interested in medicine. She spoke to her boyfriend's mother, a radiographer herself, who told her about the new LCSC program.

So she packed up and headed back to the valley, excited that she was no longer faced with hour upon hour of noxious breath.

White said the radiography program was started in the fall of 2002 in response to a 12 percent radiographer vacancy rate nationwide. The rate was even higher in Idaho, he said.

And with virtually no marketing, the program filled and even had a waiting list.

White attributes that sudden success to good starting wages -- \$17 to \$20 per hour -- and the relatively short amount of time it takes to get a degree.

"Plus, health care is seen as recession-proof," he added. And before 2002, the nearest radiography programs were in Spokane and Boise.

Plans are being discussed to add a bachelor's degree in the future. White said that would train graduates in the more complex scans like MRI and CAT.

The program graduated its first class of eight in May 2004, and a class of 16 this year. An additional instructor was hired, too. But it was scaled back to 10 entrants this year due to a shortage of good clinical positions, White said.

Students have been placed at six hospitals this summer, at Pullman, Moscow, Lewiston, Clarkston, Cottonwood and Colfax and a Lewiston clinic. Six more sites are available, but White said they are not usually busy enough to provide good clinical experience.

One downside to having such a response to the radiography program is that many of those formerly open positions have filled, White said. That was another reason radiography was scaled back to 10 new spots per year.

But there is a wide-open market for temporary radiographers, he said, and as long as graduates are flexible, they will find a good job. This year's graduates went 16 for 16 finding jobs.

Both Spedden and Willows say they can be flexible.

"I'll go wherever I can get a job," Willows said, "although it would be nice to stay here and not move."

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